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233 amongst them and, at the approach of our cars, they reared in terror and loped awkwardly towards a defensive buttress of rock. One supercilious parent stood his ground, eyeing us with a bilious look in which both reproach and indignation were combined; he thrust out a pendulous lip and roared like a miniature lion. Further on we met the owners of the herd, a group of Bedouin Arabs, who were squatting on the sand, eating dates and chipatties. Mauser rifles, embellished with silver bands, were slung over their shoulders and, although they looked fierce enough to cut our throats at the slightest provocation, they cheerfully answered the '*Subbuk ala'l bukhair*' with which the Khan Sahib greeted them.

We were about twenty miles from our objective, the little seaport of Mahrid (which is separated from the town of Ras-al-Khaimah by a wide creek), when the station wagon again broke down and had to be finally abandoned. The engineer, who informed us that a defective petrol pump was the cause of the trouble, volunteered to remain behind with the driver until we returned with a tow rope. The road became worse as we set forth again, the steering wheel frequently being wrenched out of the coxswain's hands as the truck was flung down sharp escarpments or rolled down soft banks of deep sand. When we reached a small village, unnamed on the map, the habitations of which consisted of rude barousti huts, the track disappeared in a clump of ream trees and we narrowly escaped falling into a newly-dug well.

The villagers clustered around our car and successfully misdirected us on to a road leading in the opposite direction to that which we desired to take. Fortunately a mud wall and a dead camel barred our progress and we stopped the truck, while the Khan Sahib and myself reconnoitred the environs of the village to get our bearings. When one is lost in a patch of desert it is no easy matter to retrieve one's position on the map. We decided that
136 our road lay to the left, and returned to the car and the dead camel,
825 over which hovered, in vicious anticipation, a flock of scrofulous vultures and hawks.

These revolting creatures are venerated by the Arabs, as they are very efficient scavengers and in a few days will pick a carcase clean, so that in a short time one returns to find nothing left but a perfect skeleton or sun-bleached bones scattered over the desert. It is a serious offence to shoot a vulture, which the Arabs call *nasir*. They never attack a living creature, as the eagle will do, but hover above it

directly it shows signs of dying. I was told that they will follow a sick donkey for miles, circling lazily in the air and greedily awaiting the moment when the animal will totter to its knees and slowly expire.

A patriarchal-looking Arab in a brown silk *abbas* came towards us and greeted the Khan Sahib with affection. He told us that he belonged to the retinue of the Sheikh Raschid, who was camping in the hills nearby. Apparently the sheikh was on a hunting expedition and had shot several gazelle and *houbari*, the lesser bustard. We declined his invitation to take coffee with the sheikh, as this would have meant a delay of at least an hour, and time was pressing; so he gave us very exact instructions for finding the road to Mahrid. This meant crossing a wadhi, where the ground was still soggy and uncertain for heavy vehicles, but with luck and good driving we crossed it without mishap. A grubby Arab boy appeared from behind a neam tree and, jumping on our running board, insisted on showing us the way; we did not begrudge him the lift and, as it transpired, he really was helpful.

The way meandered through a field of perfumed clover, a small-leaved variety with tiny yellow flowers. The scent was reminiscent of mimosa and was so strong as to be almost overwhelming. Hundreds of bees, attracted by the smell, filled the still air with their murmuring. The Arabs collect large quantities of honey from this district, and it is all made from the scented clover-pollen. The mountains now loomed titanically above us, grim and lowering, and ten miles to the west we could see the spires and towers of Ras-al-Khaimah reflected in the clear blue waters of the creek.

At the foot of the hills the softer green of the grass was shaded by dark avenues of neam trees, plantations of date palms, and the summer gardens of the wealthier residents. We had eight miles to go before we reached Mahrid, and it was already noon. We felt hungry and thirsty, and longed for the cool veranda of the Khan Sahib's house, with prospects of sherbet, *haloua* and cheese. At that moment—such is the perversity of life—our truck gave a convulsive cough and refused to budge further. A quick inspection by our driver revealed that we had run out of petrol.

No course was open to us other than to alight from the overheated vehicle, light pipes or cigarettes, and sit down to talk the situation over. We had a faint inkling of how the Army at Tobruk and Marble Arch must have felt in a similar predicament, only with Messerschmitts and Junkers zooming overhead, and how they

[1 [Near Mahrid -- Analyst]]

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During the journey to Ras-al-Khaimah, which we undertook in a large sailing dhow, he related some interesting facts about the Mohammedan religion and its *tabus*. The majority of Europeans, he said, often imagined that to the true follower of the Prophet the dog was anathema, not to be touched or mentioned in conversation. Now it was very true that some of the stricter sects of Islam regarded the dog as unclean, but this view was not generally held by the tribes in Oman, who were fond of their dogs, fed and treated them well, and regarded them as household pets. One should, however, always wash one's hands after touching a desert dog. Knowing our pai dog, we unequivocally agreed with this dictum, for these pariahs are never washed and, though his short brown hair looks clean and in good condition, it is usually crawling with lice and other vermin.

The pai is a descendant of the wild dog of the desert, but he has been domesticated for centuries and has all the virtues of the tamed household pet. Although exceedingly timid by disposition, he will bark fiercely at undesirable visitors and makes an excellent watch-dog for that reason, although he rarely attacks and is easily driven off. He is so accustomed to being bullied and stoned by village children, that if one merely bends down and pretends to pick up a stone he will take to his legs with a yelp. He is the laziest creature imaginable and will spend all his days lying in the sun, oblivious of the scores of flies which settle on his eyes and nose, too tired to flick them off. When approached, he will roll over on his back and stick his legs up in the air, as if to say: 'I am defenceless: do with me what you will'.

Pai dogs have very little 'character', are incurably sentimental and lacking in common sense; they have no traffic sense and are constantly run over by cars. Yet in time one grows fond of them. Like most dogs, they are loyal to one master and enjoy nothing so much as to be petted or to lie on a rug and dream. In appearance they resemble the English whippet, but have the head of a terrier, and their run is something of a trot. Their short-haired coats are of a rich golden brown, running to light fawn on the head and belly. The sheikhs breed a special kind of hunting dog, which is fast and cunning and is used for gazelle hunting. These animals are similar to the pai dog, but have sharper faces and long, silky brown hair. They are probably a cross between the pai dog and the saluki.

The sea in the creek was very calm and the gentle breeze scarcely stirred our sails, so that we took nearly twenty minutes to cross the

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—which this book makes no pretence to be—my remarks are of little value. All I did was to make notes and sketches of what I saw. Thus it required no expert to identify the sand-piper skipping across the dunes; a sprightly, stone-coloured bird with a chirruping cry resembling the song, much amplified, of a cricket. On a neam tree my companion spotted a blue jay, more subdued in colouring than its European cousin, and took a snapshot of it before it took alarm and dived with flashing wings into a bush. Other species which haunt this valley are the hoopoe, known to the Arabs as *Upupa*, three of which I saw in July; the blue-headed wagtail, which has a rich yellow throat and belly and slate-blue back; the desert wheatear, stonechats, a small white owl, and a species of nightjar. Doves were fairly common in the groves of neam trees, whilst I saw numerous varieties of hawks and falcons.

A bird of passage in the Oman peninsula is the tiny green bee-eater (*Merops Orientalis*), a small colony of which I observed for several days in a clump of date palms, whilst a more frequent visitor was the roller, or blue jay (*Coracius Bengaliensis*), an emigrant from India. It has a lazy, undulating flight, and a harsh, corvine cry; its wings in flight are barred light and dark blue. In the valley beyond the tower small lakes of stagnant salt water are sometimes formed, the remnants of floods or high tides, and on these I have seen the white cattle egret (*Bulbulculus Ibis*), grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), and wild duck.

What thrilled me as much as any of these was the little desert lark, which trilled its silvery notes high up in the blazing sky, or the kingfisher, flashing its silvery-blue wings across a *wadhi*. It was because they were so unexpected in this arid waste that they gave such pleasure. Most of the birds one finds in Oman are migrants from India and Africa, although the former predominate.

Of insects the most numerous are flies; black, buzzing flies of many species, which settle on one's head and shoulders in swarms; in the village booths they hover above the unsavoury dried meats and fish, dense clouds of them arising as you pass. There is a very interesting spider to be observed amongst the scrub in which it hides; less than a quarter of an inch long and half as broad, it curls up its legs when touched and looks just like a half-ripe wild strawberry. The Arabs say its bite is poisonous, but I have held one in the palm of my hand without being bitten. Suleman Beg, our Indian sayce, once told me that the presence of these spiders indicates rain.

The pure-blooded Bedouin, the gypsy of the desert, whom one finds all over Arabia, is the most orthodox of all Arabs. He scorns with pious horror the tales of witches, djinns and devils. Yet even he will hesitate to slay a hyena; for do not witches ride upon their backs when the moon is full? One cannot condemn these children of the sands for holding the unknown in such awe, or for peopling the *wadhis* and caves with imaginary forms. There are people to-day in Ireland who believe in *sidhe* (fairies), descendants of the Firbolgs, and who shudder at the mention of banshee or leprechaun; the Scottish highlander is little less credulous, whilst in lonely parts of Wales old women still practise sorcery and stick pins in waxen images.

The Arabs have some reason to be superstitious. There is something formidable and furtive about the limitless expanse of the desert, with its distant mountains, its mirages and deep silences. Time in the clock sense has no meaning, and to-day is but yesterday to-morrow. Those who pray daily that the wells may not dry up; who subsist on rice and dates and dried fish; whose sole possessions are a camel, a donkey, two wives and a tent or palm-leaf hut, must think in terms of simple equations. If they personalize the unknown and the elements which control their lives, who are we to criticize them?

The stars that nightly twinkle above their goats'-hair tents; the Shimal that blows sand-clouds into their eyes and ears, and the pitiless sun which blackens every plant that dares to show a blade in summer—all these are no mere scientific phenomena to the Arab. The man who can read the life-history of a camel from a rough track in the sand has a dark mind which sees deep motives in all objective existence and even in inanimate things; he peoples his world with forms that are mere chimera to the Westerner. The mention of a unicorn does not make him laugh.

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228 up outside the traffic office at the Fort just before the arrival of the
439 aircraft, to have them weighed, insured and locked up in the safe. Only one package was ever lost in transit, and in this case the insurance company paid the consignors compensation after investigations lasting three years.

228 Pearl fishing is the principal source of wealth among the people
434 on the Arabian side. It has been estimated that, if the supply of pearls were to fail—either owing to a disease among the oysters or sterility due to poisoning of the beds—the effect would be disastrous; the ports of the Trucial Oman Coast, which have no other resources, would practically cease to exist. The purchasing power of the inhabitants of the eastern coast of Arabia depends almost entirely on the pearl fisheries. In normal times about five thousand boats are employed in the industry, and more than seventy-four thousand operatives are engaged, not taking into account their families. Apart from the divers and boats' crews there are numerous capitalists, large and small, with their dependents whose funds are invested in the industry.

439 The value of the trade varies with the demand; in 1833 the annual value of pearls exported from the Gulf was only £300,000; in 1886 it was £400,000; in 1904 it was only £30,439—an extremely poor season—whilst prior to the war it reached the high figure of £1,500,000. Whether in the near future the annual turnover will again exceed the million mark depends on two factors: the dictates of fashion, and the condition of the oyster beds.

228 Hassan's family have been engaged in the pearling industry for three hundred years, and he knows as much about pearls as any man. He can judge the weight of a pearl exactly by balancing it in his hand, and estimate its texture by scraping its surface with his teeth.
437 Many merchants carry a tiny pair of jewellers' scales with them, for business deals are often carried out in the café or even in the street. Many are sold on commission by 'agents' and I have even had pearls offered to me by bearers, coolies and guards.

228 Hassan told me a great deal about the pearling industry, although
825 some of the Arab lore is hardly scientific. Thus, if there is a poor crop, the natives often ascribe this to shortage of rain. There is a tradition that the young and shell-less oysters come to the surface when it is raining, or the moon is full. The raindrops are the seeds of fertility, while the moon produces lustre; the rain is the father of a good pearl and the oyster the mother. It is a poetical notion, and no one has disproved its truth.